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ABSTRACT

This Digest recounts the varied experiences, for both elementary school students and teachers, of producing a classroom newspaper. In the particular instance discussed in the Digest, for the students, it was a chance to collaborate with their peers, to pursue their own special interests, and to see their work published. For the teacher-adviser, it was a chance to watch the students put the newspaper together bit by bit, appreciate the newspaper when it is printed, and wait for the audience's reaction when they read it. Also presented are eight basic guidelines for creating a student newspaper. (NKA)

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# Collaborating on a Newspaper in the Elementary Classroom

by Nola Kortner Aiex

"One of the oldest of living language activities, almost as old as printing itself, is the newspaper...Every school should have one..." (Backes, 1995). Indeed, in my experience, collaborating with students on a school or a classroom newspaper, watching them putting it together bit by bit, appreciating it when it is printed, and then sitting back and waiting for the audience's reaction has to be one of the most rewarding experiences an educator can have. This Digest will discuss the experience of publishing a classroom newspaper.

More than a decade ago, I spent several years teaching in a multicultural elementary school in downstate Illinois where about one-third of the students were not born in the United States and were in various stages of learning English. Ironically, my job was not to teach the children English but rather to keep the dozen or so Brazilian and Portuguese youngsters registered in the school from totally forgetting their Portuguese while they were in the United States. They were the children of Brazilian and Portuguese graduate students, and they would all eventually return to their countries of origin.

*A Newspaper in Portuguese*

About 25 countries and at least 10 languages were represented in this relatively small school of 220 students. Those of us who taught Farsi, Spanish, Japanese, Chinese, Arabic, French, German, Hebrew, Korean, and Portuguese shared several large rooms, and for two hours a day, we drilled our students in their native languages. But what else can an instructor do with two groups of students, one group representing the primary grades and one group representing the intermediate grades, and all in various stages of development and various stages of homesickness--especially when not much of any kind of materials are readily available in Portuguese?

Well, we undertook many projects over the school year, but without a doubt, the most successful project was our newspaper, which we worked on together one day each week for several months. Each class contained six or seven students, and as I noted before, one class consisted of 5 to 8 year olds and the other of 9 to 11 year olds. Let me say that, as the nominal advisor, I exercised a very loose control over the youngsters. Each child was allowed to write about what he or she wanted to write about--our sports reporter was a 5-year-old kindergartner, but he was the most interested in sports of all the youngsters (he was also our television critic). And every child was allowed to write several pieces. We usually began with a brainstorming session--each student was asked to come with several ideas, based on his or her personal interests. Students researched their stories, conducted interviews, drafted their stories, and then revised, after discussions in class.

In 1995 a high school newspaper advisor, Carrie Denman, wrote about the step-by-step work of preparing an article or story. She said: "Never have I had to explain why we do each of these steps; students can see the necessity of each one." This held true even for my group of elementary-aged children--they, too, could see why each step was necessary and worked hard on their tasks.

One shy little girl who had come to this country just as she was on the brink of learning to read in Brazil, and who had experienced the most difficulty in learning to read English, turned out to be an excellent illustrator. She decorated all the pages of our newspaper with beautiful designs and elaborated a cleanly legible masthead for the paper. She also designed the page

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layouts. One newspaper educator has written: "An advisor must be sensitive enough to raise and lower standards...allowing some students to make mistakes to learn and providing a safety net for others so that they might learn." (Bailer, 1995) This educator is seconded by Bob Kanehl (1994) who helps his elementary students in Maine publish a successful class newspaper, "New Suncook News." His school operates under the inclusionary model, which means that special education students are in class at all times and participate in all activities--they too contribute to the paper. Producing a newspaper allows participation for every student.

*Cooperation and Sharing*

In the case of the Portuguese-speaking students I was advising, if any particular child was still struggling with the physical intricacies of writing, (our sports reporter/television critic, for example) then he or she dictated his or her story to one of the older children, who copied it down. Many discussions occurred between the instigator of the story and the scribe about language and vocabulary selection during this process. The reporter was much more likely to pay attention to his or her slightly older colleague's interventions about spelling and punctuation than if the advisor has been making the error corrections. According to Marjorie Simic (1993): "...children can play both the roles of author and audience to each other's pieces. Instead of questioning the teacher, they can question each other for clarity of meaning."

*Reading and Writing a Newspaper*

One educator (Ediger, 1996) relates that a student teacher and a cooperating teacher that he supervised first developed a unit for sixth graders called "Reading the Daily Newspaper." Students then asked if they could write a newspaper for their parents (as audience) of what was being studied in their classroom and what kinds of learning activities were being pursued in the language arts. They broke into committees and devoted a week to producing their newspaper, taking it home to their parents on Friday afternoon. There was considerable positive feedback from the parents who asked for similar newspapers for the other curriculum areas!

In a practicum project for a private school summer program, Donna McCann (1992) implemented a school newspaper to improve effective communication between the small school population and their parents. The results echo those of the project Ediger described. Parents felt better informed of what was going on in the school and were gratified that their children improved their writing skills.

*Guidelines for a Student Newspaper*

In his very useful book designed for elementary school teachers called "Kids in Print: Publishing a School Newspaper," Mark Levin (1997) lists some guidelines for a successful publication, under the heading "Why Publish a School Newspaper?": (1) Student and faculty readership provides a real audience on an ongoing basis; (2) Students are encouraged to write about things that are meaningful to them--to "write what they know"; (3) Process writing skills are an important part of newspaper work; (4) Students have a voice; (5) Newspapers provide a variety of jobs and meet the needs of students of many persuasions; (6) Great newspapers require great cooperative effort; (7) Students learn and apply real-life skills by publishing a paper: organizing, prioritizing, meeting deadlines, creative problem solving; (8) Newspapers are terrific public relations pieces to give to parents, libraries, community centers, etc. Indeed, a school or class newspaper can serve many purposes, both educational and communicative--and the children love producing it.

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